



WELCOME

HOWARD COUNTY TOURISM NEWS

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From the Baltimore Sun

'A gift for the best possible kind of friend' Howard Neighbors

By Janet Gilbert
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Regina Ford, director of public relations for Turf Valley Resort, has long been involved in the community. For the past 28 years, she has been promoting Turf Valley and Howard County; after all, a hotel and its surroundings ought to have a symbiotic relationship -- both welcoming visitors with open arms.

When Ford heard about the [Howard County Tourism Council's](#) Blossoms of Hope project in September 2004, she approached Turf Valley management for support. Blossoms of Hope is an initiative to plant 1,000 pink Kwanzan cherry trees on public land all over Howard County, with a portion of proceeds benefiting the Claudia Mayer Cancer Resource and Image Center. Turf Valley Resort not only became a corporate sponsor of one of the "founders' trees," a grove of the first 20 in Centennial Park, but supported Ford's involvement in the project as a volunteer.

It was at an early meeting, setting prices for the initial trees, that Ford's business mission turned into a personal one.

"I knew we could get \$1,000 for the trees," said Ford, focusing on area businesses and corporations. The founders' trees would each have a dedication plaque at the site of the tree, indicating the contributor or honoring a recipient. Ford suddenly thought of her friend of 25 years, Ann Moon, who had been diagnosed with breast cancer 15 years earlier and had recently learned the cancer had returned.

"I thought, what a wonderful gift, for the best possible kind of friend," said Ford.

Then she thought of her and Ann's five close friends, who had been meeting regularly for a quarter-century. She left the meeting and got on the telephone. All

agreed that the tree idea was perfect; Ann was an avid gardener, a "country girl" who loved walking in Centennial Park.

Ford describes Moon as an independent woman who raised chickens and roosters in her backyard, and could handle any sort of mechanical issues with cars, as well.

"We all called her 'the wisest woman we knew,'" said Ford. "Ann was very resourceful and resilient," she said. "Anywhere she went, she touched people with her genuineness."

It turned out that Ann's circle of friends was far greater than five. As word of the tree idea spread, the number of contributors grew to more than 30.

"I can't tell you how thrilled she was," Ford said of Moon's reaction to the news that her friends had decided to honor her with a tree.

Though the cancer had returned with a vengeance, Moon was determined to come to the dedication of the founders' grove a year ago. On oxygen and too weak to stand, she sat in her van and watched the ceremony.

Two weeks later, Moon died and, in the words of Ford, "became the patron saint of the project."

On April 28, the friends of Ann Moon will gather again, at 10 a.m. at Blossoms of Hope Way in Centennial Park, for the Blossoms of Hope dedication ceremony for a second grove of 20 trees. Ford said that through their involvement with the gift tree, Moon's many friends had all promised to keep in touch. "After 25 years of being a friend to someone, we felt like we knew these people, and they knew us," said Ford. Ford will hold a reception at her home for Moon's friends after the ceremony.

One of those friends is Rachelina Bonacci, executive director of Howard County Tourism. Bonacci keeps a framed photograph of Moon, taken at the founders' planting, on her desk.

"This project beautifies Howard County, beckons people to Howard County and gives back to Howard County," said Bonacci. The last Friday in April is Arbor Day, and Howard County Tourism chose it to recognize the individuals and corporations that have purchased trees since the founders' dedication one year ago. One hundred percent of the price of a tree is tax deductible, and 30 percent goes to the Mayer cancer center.

Then, there is the unquantifiable aesthetic aspect of the project.

"The blooms are like a double carnation," said Bonacci. "It affects your disposition -- when they begin to bloom, you know spring is here."

The photo of Moon on Bonacci's desk has a similar effect. "We had so many new responsibilities here," said Bonacci, reflecting on the growth of the Blossoms of Hope project. "We had to build a second board, write a business plan, find funding, create a Web site -- in addition to all we do here," said Bonacci.

"I would look at the photograph of Ann and her tree, and it inspired me to keep the deadlines I had set up for myself," she said.

Blossoms of Hope recently participated in the National Cherry Blossom Parade and continues to attract contributors seeking a more meaningful commemoration of major life events. Sponsorships are sold for \$500, and site locations are all over the county, from the central library to Schooley Mill Park and Howard County Center for the Arts. The newest \$1,000 sponsorship opportunities are opening at Mount Ida at Patapsco Female Institute and the Courthouse in historic [Ellicott City](#). Details are available on the Web site: www.visithowardcounty.com/blossomsofhope.

"It's the most rewarding thing we've done," said Bonacci.

For all she went through, Ann Moon continues to smile back from the photograph on Bonacci's desk.

Is there someone in your neighborhood worth writing about? Is there an event that everyone in Howard County should be aware of? If there is, Janet Gilbert, our new neighbors reporter, wants to know about it. Janet brings a wealth of writing experience and knowledge of Howard County to her position. E-mail Janet at janetgilbertsun@verizon.net, or by calling 410-313-8276.

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